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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The rising gap between rich and poor: A look at the persistence of educational disparities in the United States and why we should worry

Roseanne L. Flores^{1*}

Abstract: In 2001 the no child left behind act was signed into law with the promise to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their white and more affluent peers. Ribbons were cut, ceremonies were held, as America set off on a new path to ensure that all children would have the tools necessary to achieve the American Dream. Children who in the past only had access to low-quality schools would now be able to attend high-quality schools and acquire the skills necessary to become productive citizens and obtain jobs that would catapult them into the middle class. They would have a “choice.” The choice to attend a failing school, usually deemed “public” or the choice to attend a “charter school” the new option, which would provide them with a high-quality education. Fast forward and after fourteen years of living with the law the idea of obtaining a good public education has continued to decline while the notion of attending a high-quality charter school has continued to be popular in spite of the evidence. The purpose of this paper is to address how neoliberal policies have simultaneously led to the growth of charter schools and the persistence of educational disparities and to examine what is in store for the majority of Americans in the near future if public education destroyed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roseanne L. Flores is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She has published peer-reviewed articles in the areas of education, health disparities, poverty and child development and policy. In 2009 she was a visiting scholar at the educational testing service in Princeton, NJ where she worked on assessment, research, and policy. The information in the current article is important for parents, educators, and policy makers who care about ensuring that our children have access to a high-quality public education. A high-quality education provides the foundation for children to grow intellectually and socially so as to become productive and successful adults. Understanding how the corporatization of education has changed the narrative and shifted resources away from public education to charter schools is critical so that parents can in fact make an informed “choice.”

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Today, as in the past, the vast majority of parents want what is best for their children. American parents want to ensure that their children have access to the American Dream. In particular, parents of children living in low-income communities and those of minority children want their children to have a good education. They believe that if their children work hard and follow the rules they will be able to become successful adults and move into the middle class. Parents still believe that access to the American Dream begins with access to high-quality education. With access to high-quality public schools on the decline parents believe that charter schools are the optimal alternative. To date however, the evidence suggests that not all charter schools provide children with a high-quality education. Understanding how public tax payer dollars are being shifted to pay for underperforming charter schools is critical for parents to make informed decisions.

Subjects: Sociology & Social Policy; Social Policy; Childhood; Education Policy & Politics

Keywords: educational disparities; neoliberal policies; public education; poverty; charter schools

There is a little girl named Jane who lives with her aunt and her cousin. Jane's parents have died and she is depending on her aunt for support. Jane is an orphan. Jane's aunt is not very pleasant and in fact despises Jane. Jane is given a "choice" she can either remain living with her aunt or attend a lovely private school for girls called "Lowood". Jane chooses to go to Lowood because she believes she will receive a wonderful education with music and art lessons and finally have lots of friends! Much to her surprise when Jane arrives at Lowood she finds not the pleasantries she was led to believe would exist, but rather a dull, drab institution where she will remain until she is an adult. Lowood will prepare her to eventually become a teacher, not normally a bad profession, however if the board of trustees have their way she will remain at Lowood and be paid less than she is worth because she will have no other options. The little girl in question is Jane Eyre (Brontë, 1847).

Fast forward and the year is 2017. Today thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act and the passing of the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) legislation signed into law on December 10, 2015, many parents have been given the opportunity to make "choices" concerning where their children can attend school in order to obtain a good education. They can either choose to have their children attend the local public school or choose to have their child attend an alternative school supported by public funding. Many parents have chosen the "alternative" school believing that like Jane, that the new school will provide their children with a better education, with music and art, qualified teachers, small classes, and exposure to literature like "Jane Eyre", an education they could never have imagined their children obtaining by attending the local public school, with its few resources, often less than adequate infrastructure, and under qualified teachers. Unfortunately, this ideal school does not exist. Many of these institutions, although run by private corporations and paid for by taxpayer money have failed to live up to their promises and have not adequately educated American children, particularly those most at risk (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Harvey, 2011; Henry, 2017). Although not quite as dismal as the fictional Lowood school many charter schools have failed to provide children with a high-quality education. To be clear not all charter schools are inferior and some have in fact lived up to their expectations, providing an excellent alternative to local community public schools. That being said, while some charter schools have provided a rigorous alternative to local public schools, these schools have been the exception rather than the norm (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015; Fabricant & Fine, 2012). In general, the overall findings have demonstrated that charter schools, primarily those in low-income and minority communities, have underperformed in comparison to their public counterparts, leaving many children academically unprepared and performing below the national norms (Fabricant & Fine, 2012).

So if charter schools after so many years have not proven to be superior to public schools in lifting all children academically why is the United States still so focused on creating more of them, and supporting them with public funding? Is it because it is believed they will provide children with the skills they will need to succeed later in life on specific jobs? If so the question that arises is what type of skills and for what type of jobs? Are they jobs, that will lead to upward mobility and entry into the middle class or will they be ones that will allow these children to remain part of the underclass. Under the new neoliberal education practices many children, particularly children from minority and low-income communities, given the current climate, will not be provided with a high-quality education that will lead to upward mobility but rather they will receive a substandard education and will develop a set of skills that will allow them to enter the workforce at the bottom taking low paying jobs to support themselves and their families.

Like Jane, many of the parents and children provided with these "choices" are poor. Many of these children have never read, or may ever read "Jane Eyre" because it is not a part of their curriculum. Many of these children will only be required to obtain the most basic of "skills" that businesses' think

poor children will need to take their rightful place in society, a place at the bottom. Because of these educational disparities the education and income gap will continue to widen and poor and minority children and their families will be left behind.

The following sections will address the role of public education in the United States, the role of neoliberalism in the corporatization of American education, the continued existence of educational disparities despite the rise of charter schools across the nation, the importance of public education for creating an informed citizen and preserving our democracy, and finally why we must respond now or risk dooming the next generation to a life of menial labor and low wages.

1. Public education in America

Education was not always free in the United States (Stone, 2009). It was not until the mid-19th century that free public schools became available primarily through the efforts of Thomas Mann (Stone, 2009). Mann argued for the use of state taxes to support the improvement and access to free schooling for all children. This fight was not easily won, but in 1860 the majority of states came on board giving rise to publically funded free education (United States Dept. of State, 2008). In addition to the creation of the common school the Morrill Land Act of 1862 gave rise to the selling of public lands for the establishments of public colleges to support agriculture and industry (United States Dept. of State, 2008). Frontier schools were also established with Congress mandating that territories provide a free education for all their inhabitants before they could receive statehood. From the 1890s through the 1920s public education continued to grow. According to the work of Dianne Ravitch as cited in the State Department's *USA Education in Brief* (2008) public education provided low-income immigrants with an opportunity to assimilate to the American culture while also obtaining social mobility.

By the mid-20th century although access to universal public education K-12 had been become a reality for the majority of White Americans, the same could not be said for the nation's minority citizens, with the largest group affected being African-Americans (United States Dept. of State, 2008). Explicit and implicit segregation was alive and well in both the south and the north. It was not until the 1954 landmark decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, when African-Americans challenged segregation and the Supreme Court ruled that "separate education facilities were unequal" that the tide began to shift with resources being committed to providing a quality education for all. It was also during this time that federal money was earmarked through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965 (ESEA) for schools that served poor and minority children (Stone, 2009; United States Dept. of State, 2008). Federal legislation was also passed during this time to address the needs of Hispanics, the Bilingual Education Act (1968) and the needs of children with disabilities, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975).

That said, in 1983 the Regan administration released a report entitled a "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Educational Reform". The report addressed the under-performance of American children in comparison to their peers across the world (Stone, 2009). Moreover, it focused on the achievement gap that remained between middle class White children and poor White and minority children even after the gains made by the Civil Rights movement. Americans became alarmed because they feared they would lose their competitive edge, slipping from their enviable status of being number one (Scott, 2011; Stone, 2009). In 2000 the Bush administration authored legislation entitled the *America 2000: Excellence in Education Act* which attempted to address education reform by advocating for school choice, national testing and access to alternative schools (Scott, 2011). Those who supported this legislation argued that it would be based on the principles of a free market economy by introducing the concept of free choice. This legislation did not pass but the *GOALS 2000: Educate America Act* which was based on the similar principles was signed into law by Bill Clinton in 1994 (Scott, 2011). While the legislation signed under Clinton addressed some of the educational issues many felt it was not robust enough because the persistent achievement gap continued to exist between middle class White students and poor White and minority students. In 2001 with bipartisan support the *No Child Left Behind Act* was signed into law. The explicit goal of this legislation was to finally provide a quality education for all children, particularly minority children

and children living in low-income communities. The not so explicit goals were to corporatize American public education.

2. Neoliberalism and the corporatization of public education

According to Martinez and Garcia (1997) economic liberalism has been around since the 1800s and prevailed well into the 1900s until the Great Depression in the 1930s. Early liberalism under Adam Smith and others supported the abolition the role of government to intervene in the economy (Martinez & Garcia, 1997). Smith and others argued that it was through free trade that the nation's economy would develop. These ideas were liberal at the time and encouraged free competition, meaning "capitalists could make huge profits as they wished" (Martinez & Garcia, 1997). In the 1930s after the Great Depression John Maynard Keynes questioned the tenants of liberalism and took the position that full employment was necessary for the growth of the economy which could only be obtained with the intervention of central banking and government spending. Based on this theory Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted many of the policies of the New Deal which led to the prosperity of the America. That said, the supporters of economic liberalism did not go away, but bided their time and resurrected themselves sometime later when corporate profits began to fall and they saw opportunities to make money on a global scale. Thus began the era of neo-liberalism. (Martinez & Garcia, 1997). The tenants of neo-liberalism according to Martinez and Garcia (1997) were based on the following premises: (1) that the market should rule free of government intervention, i.e. workers' wages should be decreased and workers should be de-unionized with their salaries driven by productivity. In addition, the prices on goods and services should not be fixed so as to let the market work and increase economic growth; (2) that government spending should be decreased for education and health care with these services being provided for by the private sector thereby cutting government spending and waste. An example of this premise can be seen when in 1995 Milton Friedman argued for the privatization of public schools by providing vouchers for children to attend alternative schools that were funded by private corporations. Such a position supported the conversion of the educational system from the public sector into the market based economy that would be eventually driven by competition and profits (Hursh, 2007b). It should be noted that this same idea is still very much alive today and is driving the current political discourse; (3) that government regulation should be eliminated so that the markets can prevail. Once again according to this view banks and corporations should be deregulated because regulations hold back profit making and economic growth which in turn hurt not only businesses, but also average and middle class Americans who ultimately benefit from the "trickling down" of business success; (4) that the privatization of goods and services should be at the forefront of economic growth. Thus the argument goes that everything public, schools, libraries, transportation, housing, all goods and services should be sold and provided by private corporations so as to increase the competition and drive down the price for the goods and services thereby shrinking government spending and waste; and finally (5) that individuals should be held accountable for themselves and families thereby removing the social safety net. The advocates of this position argued that with the increase of jobs due to the trickling down of profits from businesses anyone "who wanted to work" would be able to do so and move up the ladder and achieve the "American Dream." However, if they "chose" not to work then they should experience the natural consequences of their actions (Salazar Perez & Cannella, 2011).

3. The dismantling of public education today

Since the release of the report "A Nation at Risk" in 1983 and the work of the Nobel prize economist Milton Friedman, a neoliberal, entitled "Public Schools: Make Them Private", the door was open, the stage was set, and the foundation was provided for the passing of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and the dismantling of public education system. While in theory the *NCLB Act* was supposed to provide access to a high quality education for all children, the Act had the opposite of effect, and in fact in most cases ended up lowering standards and the critical education skills that children needed to become effective and innovative citizens and adults. It should be noted that prior to Friedman's pronouncement in 1988, Albert Shanker the president of the American Federation of teachers, recognizing the failure of public schools to educate all children adequately, called for education reform and proposed that teachers work with parents and the community using the best research and

methods to develop small schools that would address the needs of children and youth at risk (Levine & Levine, 2014). Schanker envisioned that once these schools were shown to be effective they could eventually be brought to scale (Levine & Levine, 2014). Schanker would eventually abandon this idea because he saw his dream being taken over and distorted by corporations and politics within the education system (Levine & Levine, 2014).

In 2001 the United States, with its focus on neoliberal education policies advocated for increased accountability which would hold schools and school districts responsible for the outcomes of their students by having them make adequately yearly progress (AYP) toward state proficiency goals or face the possibility of being restructured or closed. Moreover, as part of the new legislation the government supported more access for school choice. Parents could remove their children from “failing” public schools, i.e. those schools that did not reach their AYP, and place them in either another public school, or in one of the new and up and coming charter schools, or in another private institution, all paid for by public funding. All of this was under the guise that children should not have to suffer because of the incompetence of teachers, staff, and all those attached to the failing public school. The Act also required schools and school districts to create programs and hire teachers based on “scientifically-based” research, with the definition narrowly delineated to include only “experimental designs” to the exclusion of all of the methods, i.e. qualitative or mixed methods designs. What this meant was that now states would be required to prepare and recruit, in theory highly qualified teachers, based on evidence, in order to receive funding. Evidence however, which would be defined in the narrowest of terms. In addition, the Act provided states with more flexibility in the use of their funding, with the goal of being able to target their monies to provide better outcomes for children from low-income communities. Unfortunately, outcomes based on this provision of flexibility, more often than not had the opposite effect with many charter schools doing no better than public schools and in some case worse in providing a high-quality education for poor and minority children (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Furthermore, in some cases monies were diverted away from public schools in poor communities which were deemed as failing because the funds were attached to the children who left the schools. This approach led public schools to fall farther behind, leading to deleterious consequences for poor children who did not, or could not transfer (Scott, 2011).

In addition, NCLB also supported the consolidation of funding across programs serving immigrant and bilingual students under the guise of helping children become proficient in English so as to master their academic work in order to obtain the highest levels of success. Again, while a noble goal, this was often not the case, with the pass rate of ESL examination decreasing over time (Hursh & Martina, 2003). And finally, the Act called for all children to learn to read by third grade. Indeed, another noble endeavor. However, in order to ensure that this would occur, states had to implement the use of a curriculum that once again was evidence-based. The question then became whose evidence and whose curriculum?

As the NCLB Act began to be implemented many questions were raised. How would we hold teachers and schools accountable? How would we be able to measure the academic success of children? How would we be able to assess if school districts met their AYP? Solutions were suggested with the use of standardized testing rising to the top as the method of choice. Thus with the ushering in of the age of accountability the door was opened a bit wider for the entrance of businesses into the education arena to create standardized tests, provide new curriculums, open new schools, and provide tutoring and afterschool programs to support struggling students in need of passing standardized tests (Scott, 2011).

In theory the No Child Left Behind Act appeared to be a blueprint for success. It was hoped that with this new blueprint the United States would alleviate all of the problems that had plagued the education system in the past and raise its stature in the eyes of the world, while simultaneously raising the standards for children living in poor and low-income communities, or so the story went. The legislation had bipartisan support, and the majority of average Americans were behind it, and yet there were some who were skeptical. Was it because they knew the history that had led up to the

legislation? Was it because they saw the short comings of the legislation and knew that it would lead to the dismantling of public education and the widening of the achievement gap between the poor and the wealthy, the very things the authors of the legislation said they were against? The answer to both questions is probably yes. Since the legislation has been implemented, and has now been in place for over ten years, the question arises what improvements and benefits have children, families and taxpayers accrued from investing in more charter schools, and focusing on accountability and standardized testing. What progress have we made as a country? Remember the United States' educational system was once the envy of the world, and the goal of the legislation was to restore her to her position of prominence. The question that arises then is that given the investment of taxpayer dollars to support the implementation of the NCLB Act, did the investment lead to making our educational system once again the envy of the world or did it lead to just increasing profits for businesses and widening the gap between the wealthy and the poor. To address these issues we will examine the charter school movement.

4. The charter school movement in the United States

As mentioned in the previous section the concept of developing small schools under teacher control and in partnership with parents as well as the overall community was not new (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Levine & Levine, 2014). Albert Schanker had recognized that public education was in need of reform. His goal was to create small schools that would be engaging and accessible and would provide opportunities for children from low-income and minority communities to learn and succeed academically. Like most ideas the original goal of developing small charter schools to support the needs of children was a noble one, however, overtime as the idea caught on and corporations, hedge funds, and philanthropists became involved the idea morphed and turned into a business supported by the winds of neoliberalism. Fabricant and Fine (2012) describe the rise of the charter school movement in America occurring in three phases: (1) as a social justice movement; (2) as a shift in purpose and audience with the encroachment of hedge funds and philanthropists; and (3) with the passing of the Race to the Top legislation that lifted the cap on charter schools across the nation. The first phase began as a social justice movement that advocated for alternatives to the overcrowded public school system that was failing to educate all of its children, particularly low-income and minority youth. The goal as envisioned by Albert Schanker was for all interested parties, parents, teachers, and the community to work together to provide the best education possible for their children. The second phase began when the parties interested in the well-being of children began to shift and the narrative began to change. No longer were teachers considered to be the solution to addressing the problems in education, but rather they and their unions became the problem. According to the rhetoric public education was in decline because teachers were not qualified and lazy and expected to only work for a few hours a week and collect a check. Furthermore, this view held that the state had already wasted enough of taxpayer dollars on a failing system and now it was time to turn it over to the private sector to solve the problem, by stream lining costs and holding educators accountable for the satisfactory progress of their students. With this shift in discourse the purpose and function of the charter school began to shift (Levine & Levine, 2014). No longer were there long discussions about social justice, progressive education, public investment, and teacher and parent involvement but rather the focus and narrative shifted to addressing effectiveness and efficiency, accountability, a return on investment and management. In addition, serving the needs of low-income and minority children took a backseat as charter schools began to expand into middle income communities (Levine & Levine, 2014). The third phase came in 2010 with the passing of the Race to the Top legislation under the Obama administration. In order to receive federal funding under this legislation states had to agree to lift the cap on charter schools. This meant that less public money would go directly to improving the quality of public schools.

To date, while there has been a continued push to increase the numbers of charter schools in communities, particularly those serving children at risk from corporations, philanthropists, and the federal, state, and local government, the evidence is mixed with respect to the effect of attending a charter school on high academic achievement (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Henry, 2017). In fact according to the most recent CREDO *Urban Charter School Study on 41 regions Report* even with the positive

learning impacts of charter schools in urban communities there are still a large number of communities that lag significantly behind typical public schools, with some charter schools having poorer outcomes than the public schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015).

5. The persistence of educational disparities

Since the publication of “A Nation at Risk” the American public education system has been under constant scrutiny with those looking to incorporate public education into the private and corporate sectors (Giroux, 1999) and shifting the discourse to focus on accountability and testing (Hursh, 2001). With the opening of this door and the growing number of private institutions funded by public taxpayer monies the question has become what has the public gained from these partnerships? Have the educational outcomes for poor and minority changed dramatically? Have the charter schools provided a higher quality of education than public schools? Have children become more successful and innovative? Has the nation’s educational system resumed its once enviable position as being number one in the world? Or have those often quoted benefits been less than actualized.

To date when one examines the trends in the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for reading and mathematics one sees that the achievement gap has continued to exist for African-American and Hispanic students from 4th to 12th grade since 2000 until 2011 (Aud et al., 2012). Moreover, when one compares the scores of children born in the United States to their international peers, US children continue to perform less well on math and science (Noguera, 2009). According to a recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016) the United State is continuing to lose its hold on being a world class educational system. The United States continues to have fewer children enrolled in early childhood education than other OECD countries, 25–64 year old individuals who study teacher training or education science earn significantly less than engineers, manufactures or construction workers, and finally while the United States teachers spend more time teaching than most other developed countries, those extra teaching hours have not necessarily translated into better results.

In addition, in 2012 the American Psychological Association (APA, 2012) issued a report entitled “Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Education: Psychology’s Contribution to Understanding and Reducing Disparities” in which it highlighted the continued disparities that exist with respect to access to early childhood education, with working poor and middle class families who are not eligible for Head Start lacking access to quality early childhood education, the very programs that have been shown to lead to later school achievement. Furthermore, the report highlighted the need for maintaining racially diverse classrooms based on psychological research because such class rooms promote critical thinking and increase social networking which can often translate into a widening of career paths for children who would not normally have access to such information. That said, with the corporatization of public education and the opening of more charter schools many poor and minority children have been propelled back into the pre Brown versus the Board of Education period where they have “chosen” to attend the new schools, but have not been provided with truly viable options, options that will allow their children to attend high-quality schools that are diverse and not segregated.

So what does this all mean and where can we go from here? First, let me say that based on the national and international evidence the corporatization of American education is not working. We are not nurturing or developing children to become happy, educated, and truly productive adults. Rather we are encouraging the development of an uneducated labor force who will not know enough to ask the tough questions or challenge the status quo. In essence we are producing the next generation of low-wage workers. Our educational system can no longer be the envy of the rest of the world because the very thing that the world once envied, which was our ability to be creative and think outside the box, has been dismantled bit by bit and sold off to the highest bidder by our legislators who have been bought off by special interest groups. So while our government officials at the federal, state, and local levels have continued with their rhetoric about how they have fought for and will continue to fight for and create an educational system that is equitable for all children, the

evidence suggests that they have been a little disingenuous, as the outcomes have been anything but promising for poor and minority children due to the slashing of funding and lowering of expectations (Hursh, 2007a). In 2015 President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The goal of the new law was to address many of the shortcomings and unintended consequences experienced by children, families, teachers, and communities as a result of the implementation of the NCLB legislation (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). While on the surface ESSA would provide opportunities for children to flourish while simultaneously providing teachers, schools, and states some flexibility in meeting the tenants of the law to ensure children have access to high quality education given the current political climate it does not appear as if the law will be implemented as intended. Thus children will receive unequal treatment and not be allowed to reach their maximum potential. While the legislation calls on states to select indicators that will examine school quality and measure performance, even for public charter schools, is still too soon to tell whether the law will lead to positive outcomes for poor and minority children attending these schools. What is *not* unclear however is that funds will be diverted away from public education.

6. The need for investment in public education

In 1863 Abraham Lincoln at the end of his Gettysburg address offered the following words to a nation recovering from a war that was fought to obtain freedom for all - “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Lincoln proclaimed those words knowing that our freedom could not be taken for granted and that our government should not work in opposition to the needs of the people but rather it should work to protect their life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, all of which are fundamental freedoms. Today I believe if President Lincoln were alive he would be shocked and amazed to see that the United States no longer lives by the ideals he espoused after the civil war, but rather it has become a government of corporations and the wealthy, by corporation and the wealthy, for corporations and the wealthy looking to influence and control any area of public life that they feel entitled to control with public education being at the forefront! Foundations and very wealthy individuals have contributed a great deal of money to shape public education but advocating for an increase in charter schools and the use of vouchers. By investing in charter schools these corporations and individuals have taken on the role of the “shapers.” They get to shape the curriculum, hire and fire the teachers, and influence the education policy at the local, state, and federal levels. Moreover, because of their influence they get to shape the narrative about teachers’ unions, the decline in public education, and the need for the privatization of public education to address the broken public education system (Levine & Levine, 2014). Furthermore, in their ability to lobby and pump money into the system they get to shape the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government further solidifying their grip on all things public and breaking apart democratic principles.

But as Ravitch (2014) argues “privatization of public education is wrong.” According to her view public education is not a “consumer good”, but rather belongs to the public who have responsibility to ensure that it succeeds (Ravitch, 2014). Along with others she has argued that having a sound public education system is necessary for a sound democratic society. If we take seriously government of the people, by the people, and for the people then we need to consider that public schools are a part of the larger community and the community should and must have a say as to how they operate and affect the overall sustainability of the community. Corporations that are not part of the community should not have more a say than local school boards consisting of community members. Moreover, public schools accept “all” children with the goal of helping them all to thrive and become educated citizens who can participate in a democratic society. While it is true that not all public schools serve the needs of all children well. It is true that they serve the needs of the vast proportion of children in the United States, children with special needs, children who are English language learners as well as children who are homeless children who would not be served by charter schools because they would not meet their criteria for entrance into their schools. Thus by all accounts public schools are therefore necessary to educate “all children” to become productive and successful adults

and citizens. That being said, public schools can only do this if they are given the resources to become high-quality schools and not starved to death by ever increasing budget cuts and movement of funds away from their schools to charter and private schools. All children regardless of race, class, religious beliefs, gender, or disability deserve a rich educational experience with not only a basic academic curriculum but one that includes art, music, civics, physical education, exposure to literature, and nature. Our children need to be able to maximize their potential and can only do so in an environment that will allow them to thrive. Not only must they be able to take an active role in their own communities but they must also be able to contribute to the larger global community.

The United States, if she is to remain competitive, has two choices she can either invest in public education which is the system that educates the majority of her children or she can continue to disinvest in the system and watch her democracy falter with the vast majority of her citizens becoming undereducated and failing to become active members and informed citizens of the country. It is my hope that she will choose the former.

For as Abraham Lincoln said in response to the nation:

“America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Abraham Lincoln (n.d)

7. Summary and final thoughts

As I come to the end of this paper Rosa Parks, a women of great strength and courage, and a great civil rights leader comes to my mind and I can only wonder what she would have done and said about the current status of our society. As one may recall on February 27, 2013 President Obama and John Boehner unveiled a statue of Rosa Parks in the Capitol Building's Statuary Hall and hailed her as a great American who stood up for civil rights, one of those rights being a right to equality. The irony is that within a few days the then speaker with the help of the House of Representatives would set into motion a budget that would slash funds which would affect the education of our most vulnerable children. An education that would have provided children with the skills to become what the speaker and others have termed “productive” citizens. And why, because the House of Representatives did not want to raise taxes on our wealthiest constituents, the very individuals who want the skilled labor force. So much for education reform and equality!

So as always the question becomes where do we go from here? I suggest that like Rosa Parks we must all stop being complacent and raise our voices in unison and like Rosa say “No” we are not going to stand by and accept the closing of the American mind and the destruction of public institutions whether they be our schools, libraries, parks, and the like. Our very democracy depends upon us taking this action. Failure is not an option. For if we fail to act we will no longer have spaces where we are free to think or speak our minds, and dissent if necessary against the prevailing views, one of the very reasons public spaces exist. For once these spaces are privatized those who own them will limit access and crush all discussion of ideas that do not support the status quo and we will cease to be a democracy.

Thus as Congress meets to discuss changes to our tax policies it is incumbent upon the American people to advocate for an increases in taxes for our wealthiest citizens and corporations so that they pay their fair share of the tax burden and support the maintenance of the country, whether it be for our public roads, health care or our educational system. At this very moment as I write our infrastructure is crumbling. Bridges are collapsing, water pipes in schools are corroding, school buildings are full of mold, and roads are buckling from potholes. Yet the government is proposing to slash funding to pay for environmental protection, healthcare, education, housing, and transportation. The American people deserve better and should demand it from the very people who were elected by them to represent their interests.

As citizens of the United States it our obligation to remember that one of the marks of a free and sound democracy is one in which the citizens are educated, can advocate for their rights, can hold their government accountable, and can live without fear of reprisals when they disagree with their government. That is who we once were and what we must remain, that is America.

As I end this paper I wish to return to where I began by calling attention to Jane Eyre. It is my hope that future generations will have the opportunity to read “Jane Eyre” and perhaps even write literature on par with Charlotte Bronte’s work, and that they will have the “choice” to do so in a public institution. It is also my hope that all children will be provided the skills and knowledge necessary to read, write, and think, and contribute to society if they so “choose!”

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